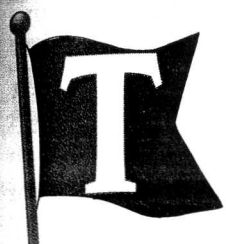


Toussaint L'Ouverture and Haïti 2



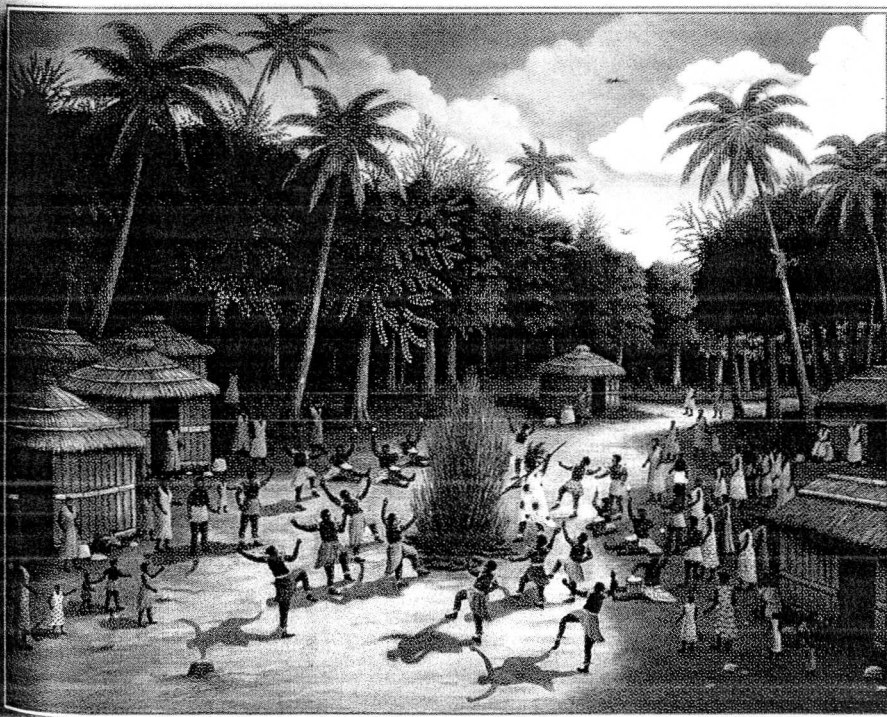
he Night of Fire It was August 1791. The sound of drums echoed from mountain to mountain and across the plain. French plantation owners in Haiti heard the dim sound of the drum beats in the distance but were not worried. They had heard them before.

It was no secret that escaped slaves, called *maroons* (muh ROONZ), hid out in the mountains. There they practiced their ancient African religion. The slaves called this religion *voodoo*.

The drums really were celebrating a voodoo rite, but it was not the usual ceremony the planters thought it was. The slaves were plotting a rebellion!

Deep in the mountains a slave and voodoo priest named Boukman led the ceremony. Around him were gathered the leaders of the slaves from across the Plain du Nord (plen duh nor), the northern plain of Haiti. Haiti was a French colony in the Caribbean, on the island of Hispaniola (hihs pun YOH luh).

This painting shows a voodoo ceremony. Voodoo was a powerful force on the island of Hispaniola in the early 1800s.



Boukman was not a field hand like most slaves. He had been a foreman who ran field crews. Later, he worked his way up to being a coachman. That was an important job on a plantation. Moreover, Boukman was a huge man who commanded respect through size alone.

All eyes followed Boukman as he gave his instructions and inspired his followers to have courage. He promised them that if they died during the rebellion, they would wake up in Africa. He concluded with a song that ends, "Hearken unto Liberty, that speaks now in all our hearts."

One week later, on August 22, 1791, some 50,000 slaves rose up and swept across the Plain du Nord. Armed with **machetes** (muh SHET eez) and **scythes** (sythz), the slaves moved in an unstoppable wave across the land. They killed and tortured plantation owners and their families. They set fire to the houses and barns and even

to the crops. The fires spread, covering the horizon and sweeping across fields, plantations, and forests. The night became as bright as day. The rich plantations were in ruins, and slave armies controlled the countryside.

vocabulary

machete a large, heavy knife used for cutting down sugarcane and brush

scythe a long, curving blade used for cutting grain and long grasses

Over the next few days, the slave army destroyed all the plantations on the Plain du Nord. Most of the surviving French took shelter in Cap François (frahn SWAH) the capital of the province.

The night on which the rebellion began became known as the Night of Fire. It marked the beginning of a 13-year struggle to create Haiti, the first black republic in the world and the first independent state in Latin America.

Haiti in 1791

Before we go further, you need to know something about Haiti prior to August 1791, when the revolution began. Haiti was a French colony called St. Domingue (san duh MANG), and it was the richest colony in the Caribbean. A century earlier, French planters had taken over the western third of the island of Hispaniola from the Spanish.

During the eighteenth century, thousands of African slaves were captured from their villages and brought in chains to North and South America and the Caribbean. Many of those slaves were taken to St. Domingue. There, they were put to work clearing the forests and planting crops of sugar, coffee, cotton, and indigo. Indigo

is a plant that produces a deep blue dye. It was in demand to dye cotton cloth made in England.

The crops the slaves planted were sold in Europe, where demand for sugar, coffee, cotton, and dyes made the prices high. The French landowners became wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. Of course, the more money they made, the more land they cleared, and the more slaves they wanted.

About 700,000 slaves worked to produce the crops that made the French landowners rich. The French population of about 35,000 included landowners, plantation managers and supervisors, colonial officials, soldiers, priests, nuns, and shopkeepers. In addition, there were some 40,000 *mulattos*. Mulattos were people of mixed race—usually with white French fathers and black slave mothers.

For every French person in the colony, there were about 20 slaves. With so many more slaves than French people, you might think that rebellion was a constant threat. But the French were not worried. They didn't think the slaves could carry out a successful uprising. Besides that, the French controlled all the guns. Against the well-armed and highly trained French soldiers, slaves

Slaves in pre-revolutionary Haiti (St. Domingue) worked under harsh conditions on the many plantations there.



would have no chance. At least, that's what the French thought.

The Struggle Continues

Boukman's uprising and the Night of Fire shocked the French, but they soon fought back. The French soldiers were well armed and trained. And if the slaves had been brutal and savage in their rebellion, the French were even worse in seeking revenge. Thousands of slaves were killed. The rest were chased into hiding in the mountains. Soon, northern St. Domingue was divided into two parts. The rebellious slaves controlled the mountains, and the French soldiers held the coastal towns, where the planters and French officials had fled during the uprising.

The uprising spread to the western part of the island. There, the planters found out what had happened in the north and put up more resistance. Port-au-Prince, the capital of the west, was saved, and the rebellion was largely controlled.

Meanwhile, in the north, Boukman was killed in battle. He was replaced by two other ex-slaves, Biassou (bee ah SOO) and Jean François (zhahn frahn SWAH). They proved to be poor leaders. Would the revolution become just a failed slave uprising?

Toussaint L'Ouverture

A new leader emerged out of the confusion. His name was François Dominique Toussaint. Later he added L'Ouverture at the end of his name. He is usually known as Toussaint L'Ouverture. *L'Ouverture* means "the opening" in French. It is said that Toussaint's enemies gave him that name because he could always find an opening in their defense to attack them.

Toussaint was born in 1743 on a plantation in northern St. Domingue. There is a legend that

Toussaint's father was an African chief who was captured and made a slave. No one knows for sure if this is true. However, Toussaint's father did teach him that there is power in knowledge. His stepfather, a priest, helped Toussaint gain that power. He taught Toussaint how to read and write French and Latin and how to use herbs and plants for healing.

Toussaint was not among the slaves who participated in the first hours of the Night of Fire. He certainly saw the fires from the plantation where he lived. And when the rebellion reached the plantation, his first concern was to get his wife and children to safety.

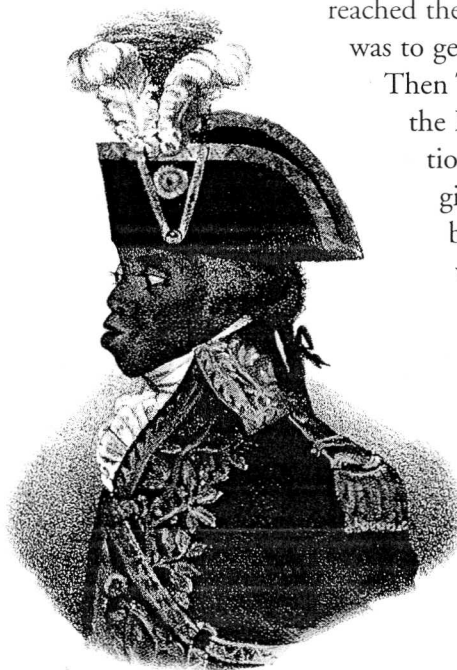
Then Toussaint drove the family of the French manager of the plantation to safety. The manager had given Toussaint his freedom years before, and the former slave wanted to protect him and his family.

Once he had taken care of his personal responsibilities, Toussaint enthusiastically joined in the revolution. "Those first moments," he later said, "were moments of beautiful delirium [dreaminess], born of a great love of freedom."

Because of his knowledge of healing, Toussaint's first service in the slave

revolt was as a doctor. Soon, however, he was giving military advice as well as medical care. The slave army was ruthless and undisciplined. They destroyed everything in their path, including the crops. After the army passed through, there was nothing for the slaves to eat but whatever wild plants and animals they could find.

Toussaint urged the leaders to teach the troops discipline and to stop destroying the crops and other things they needed for themselves. Within a short time, Toussaint was made a commander of part of the army. He taught his soldiers discipline and trained them like a professional army.



Toussaint L'Ouverture was a great revolutionary leader in Haiti.

Toussaint Leads the Rebellion

Not only were Biassou and Jean François poor leaders, but they were disloyal to the cause of freedom as well. In December 1791, when it looked as if the French might succeed in putting down the revolt, Biassou and Jean François struck a deal to turn over the former slaves in return for their own freedom. Toussaint would have no part of this. Instead, he organized the slaves into a **guerrilla army** that attacked the French when they least expected it.

After each attack the guerrilla army would disappear back into the forests and mountains. There, they would wait until Toussaint found another opportunity for a surprise attack. He came at the French with amazing speed and from unexpected directions. The French could never catch him, and they could never relax. They never knew when or where Toussaint's army would appear.

Toussaint was a memorable figure as he rode before his troops. He was a superb horseman who chose to ride without a saddle. He dressed in the splendid uniform of a captured French officer, often with a handkerchief wrapped around his head. Under his coat there was an odd shape.

Some people thought Toussaint was hunchbacked. His troops knew better.

The lump was actually a box filled with small knives and tweezers, herbs, salves, ointments, and other supplies. Besides leading his soldiers, he was ready to repair their wounds and ease their pains from battle injuries.

Toussaint won several victories over the French. He promised the French townspeople that he would treat them well if they surrendered. They trusted Toussaint, and so several towns did surrender to the rebels.

Of course, the slaves were fighting for their freedom. But no matter how many victories they won or how many towns surrendered, the French government refused to free the slaves.

While the slaves continued to fight for their freedom against the French in St. Domingue, Spain and Great Britain were also at war with

vocabulary
guerrilla army a group of soldiers who usually are volunteers and not highly trained, professional soldiers

This illustration shows Toussaint L'Ouverture, in the center with a red vest, leading his troops in a pitched battle during Haiti's revolution against the French.



France. Toussaint believed the Spanish could help him win liberty. As a result, he joined the Spanish forces in Santo Domingo, the eastern part of Hispaniola. He was named a general and won battles for the Spanish. Still, he had been raised in a French colony and felt some loyalty to France.

In 1794, France passed a law freeing all slaves. When he heard about the French action, Toussaint switched sides and began fighting for France. Toussaint was made lieutenant governor, the second in command of the colony, and he succeeded in driving the Spanish troops from St. Domingue.

By 1795, Toussaint was the most important man in St. Domingue. He was worried that the economy of the island would collapse if he didn't do something—four years of revolution had destroyed most of the plantations and driven off the owners. He asked the former slaves to come back and work in the fields and the sugar mills. But now, the workers were free—they weren't whipped and they shared in the profits.

Slowly, Toussaint began to create a separate government in St. Domingue. A constitution was written. The constitution did not claim independence from France but did declare slavery to be forever ended. Toussaint negotiated treaties

with Great Britain and the United States and began to trade sugar for arms.

In 1801, Toussaint became ruler of the entire island of Hispaniola in the name of France. All of Toussaint's plans were beginning to work out, or so it seemed. But Toussaint had not reckoned with Napoleon, who now ruled France.

Napoleon's War

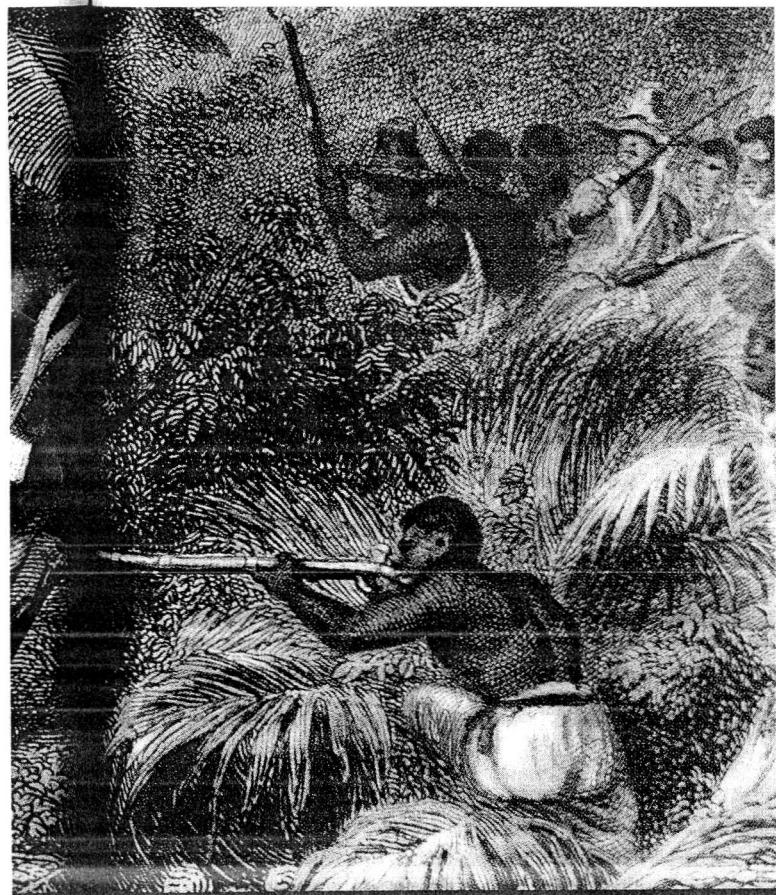
Napoleon was at the height of his power. He had conquered much of Europe and was carrying on a long war with Great Britain. Battles were fought around the world. To support his war, Napoleon needed the vast wealth that St. Domingue had once produced. He thought that the island's economy could only be restored by bringing back slavery. Napoleon organized an invasion of St. Domingue. It would be led by his brother-in-law, General Victor Leclerc. Leclerc had an army of 43,000 soldiers. It was the largest invasion force in the history of France.

Spies reported Napoleon's plans to Toussaint. A wise man, he was not surprised by the betrayal, but it caused him great sorrow. Toussaint had shown great loyalty to France, but Napoleon was not interested in the freedom of black people thousands of miles away. "I counted on this happening," Toussaint said. "I have known that they would come and that the reason behind it would be that one and only goal: reinstatement of slavery. However, we will never again submit to that."

Toussaint immediately began making preparations. He imported weapons from the United States. He reinforced his forts. He had pits and trenches dug in the forests for his soldiers. He drafted all young men 12 years old and over to train for his army.

Despite his preparations, Toussaint almost lost courage when he saw the French fleet. It is said that he cried: "Friends, we are doomed. All of France has come. Let us at least show ourselves worthy of our freedom."

As soon as the French army landed, bloodshed and violence returned. Toussaint ordered his army to burn everything rather than turn anything



over to the French. Entire cities burned. The fighting was intense. The French general Leclerc described the desperate rebels in a report to Napoleon: "These people here are beside themselves with fury. They never withdraw or give up. They sing as they are facing death and they still encourage each other while they are dying. They seem not to know pain. Send reinforcements!"

Toussaint Captured

Leclerc knew the fight to take control of St. Domingue would be long and hard as long as Toussaint was leading the rebels. So Leclerc tricked Toussaint into meeting with one of his officers. Toussaint and his family were captured and put on a ship for France. As Toussaint stood on board the ship, he said: "In overthrowing me you have cut down in St. Domingue only the trunk of the tree of liberty. It will spring up again from the roots, for they are many and they are deep." Toussaint and his family were separated, and he was sent to a prison in the mountains near Switzerland.

Toussaint, who had spent his life on a tropical island, must have been miserable in the Swiss mountains. He was separated from his family and living in a cold, damp prison. Of course, there wouldn't have been any heat, even in the winter. The French didn't execute Toussaint because they knew that would lead to more problems in St. Domingue. However, if the rebel leader died in prison, well, that was not their fault. They certainly weren't unhappy when Toussaint, who had been such a great leader of the Haitian people, caught pneumonia and died in 1803.

France Loses St. Domingue

Back in St. Domingue, the French were having new problems. The ex-slaves weren't strong enough to fight the French army head on, but they continued their guerrilla war. The French killed thousands of black people, but this only made things worse. The more black people they killed, the greater became the resistance.



In this painting by Jacques-Louis David, Napoleon Bonaparte leads his troops across the Alps between France and Austria in 1800.

The main leader of the former slaves at this time was Jean Jacques Dessalines (zhahn zhahk day sa LEEN). He had been born in Africa and brought to St. Domingue as a slave. Unlike Toussaint, he had no loyalty to France. He wanted to do more than just end slavery. He wanted to make St. Domingue independent.

Dessalines continued Toussaint's policy of burning farms and towns rather than letting the French capture them. The resistance caused great problems for the French. Nevertheless, they had thousands of troops and far superior weapons. It was only a matter of time before they would regain control of St. Domingue. But, as it turned out, time was about to run out for the French.

The Fall of the French

Yellow fever, a deadly disease carried by mosquitoes, began to spread through the French army. Thousands of French soldiers died. Reinforcements were sent, but they died, too. Even General Leclerc fell victim to the disease.

Finally, unable to conquer the epidemic, the remains of the French army left St. Domingue in 1803. Of the 43,000 men France had sent to the island, only 8,000 lived to sail back home.

Why didn't the blacks in St. Domingue suffer as much from yellow fever as the French? The answer is that they had lived with the disease longer. They had brought it to the island from Africa. The Africans caught yellow fever just like the Europeans. However, most Africans survived the disease while most Europeans died from it.

On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared St. Domingue independent. He gave the country a new name, Haiti. That was the Indian name for the island of Hispaniola before Europeans settled there.

Haiti was in ruins. Thirteen years of war had destroyed towns and farms. Dessalines knew he would have to do something to rebuild. He told the people they would have to go back to the farms and work harder than they had when they were slaves. It was the only way.

Soon, Dessalines became a dictator. In October 1804 he proclaimed himself Emperor Jacques I. The economy began to get better, but the people didn't like being forced to work on the hated plantations. They were free, why should they work like slaves? In October 1806, two and a half years after he declared Haiti's independence, Dessalines was murdered.

Haiti never had another leader like Toussaint L'Ouverture. Instead, Dessalines was more typical of the men who would rule the country. Haiti has never recovered completely from the destruction of the battle for independence. For 200 years it has suffered under the rule of dictators and bad government. These conditions have made it one of the poorest countries in the world.

This illustration shows Jean Jacques Dessalines riding at the head of some of his officers.

